**THE DHARMA AND THE 12 STEPS**

By Peter Carlson

Since Alcoholics Anonymous began in 1935, the 12 steps system has been a crucial component of a person’s recovery from alcoholism. Since that time, other “anonymous” groups have emerged, such as Alanon, Overeater’s Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, etc., with each organization changing the terminology, primarily in the 1st step, to reflect the topical addiction that the person is “powerless” over.

The expectation is that a person in recovery would “work” the steps with a sponsor, who is a more experienced member of the indicated fellowship. This involves a series of focused discussions and exercises that would help the recovering person understand the nature of their addiction, the damage to self-worth and interpersonal trust, and the ways that amends can be implemented in order to redeem themselves to themselves, others, and society in general.

This system is organized around developing trust in a “higher power”, “God as we understand him”, and organize daily life routines around an ongoing and sincere intention to “…have God remove all these defects of character”. In order to accomplish this, one would “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”

For many seeking relief from addictive behaviors, their understanding of a Higher Power was compromised by skepticism or outright rejection of the traditional notion of God; many folks dropped out of the program because of this, and because their sponsors insisted on the person’s conversion to their way of understanding God.

I didn’t grow up in any sort of religious family and had minimal, tangential exposure to traditional religious concepts and practices. Frankly, the whole religious system of living was a mystery to me, seeming to be quite superstitious, although the ethical aspects were inviting. I was heavily involved with marijuana during the late ‘60’s and throughout the ‘70’s. My recovery began in the early ‘80’s when I began my Buddhist practice. In the late ‘80’s I became a psychotherapist and addictions specialist, and became familiar with the 12 steps concepts and practices, becoming interested in the congruence between the intentions fostered by 12 steps work and Buddhist principles and practices.

Over the years, many of the folks who I taught Buddhist principles and practices to were drawn to this system because it provides a different way to understand the “Higher Power” concepts, and have had many enriching discussions about this with them. The intention for this posting is to elaborate these understandings for the benefit of whomever might hear the recording or read these notes.

The following is commentary related to my Buddhist approach to understanding and applying the 12 steps. I hope it is beneficial for those exposed to these principles and practices. The traditional 12 steps is in bold typeface, and my comments are noted in regular typeface:

**1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol —that our lives had become unmanageable.** I perceive this step to have two focal areas—the degree to which alcohol abuse is a central focus of daily life and the compulsory nature of drinking to excess, and the degree to which one’s life is unmanageable. Of course, addictive behavior is severely disruptive to one’s life in many ways, and that is unmanageable. I propose that the unmanageability issue typically precedes the addictive behavior. The majority of people who drink are not alcoholics—those folks who abuse alcohol have what is called in psychological terms a “co-occurring disorder”, such as anxiety, depression or other psychological disorder, and often these folks were adversely affected by some relationship traumas earlier in life, either in childhood, or earlier adulthood. For these folks, simply abstaining from addictive behavior doesn’t make their lives manageable—often, because they become more exposed to the precedent affliction, they relapse, often repeatedly, until they address the unmanageability issues.

**2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.** Many people, for whatever reason, lose faith in the authority of a Higher Power, so this is a stopping point as far as they are concerned regarding the 12 steps. As a “‘60’s hippie”, affected by the divorce of my parents, as well as not being exposed to religious conditioning, I struggled with this step. All authority was questionable. My exposure to the Dharma gives me solace, however, as it suggests there is a lawfulness to my lived experience. My Higher Power is the Four Noble Truths, that is, the reality of dukkha (distress and confusion/unmanageability), a deep understanding of how craving and clinging has affected and continues to affect my life, the feeling of relief that I experience when craving and clinging is overcome, and the ways and means to accomplish that (the Noble Eightfold Path).

**3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.** What this amounts to is my commitment to daily meditation practice (see step 9, below) and to cultivating a lifestyle around insight, kindness, compassion, generosity and equanimity. The example of the historical Buddha offers faith, both in regards to his Awakening and to the coherent and applicable Dharma teachings that have emerged from his practice and that of the millions of folks who have benefitted since then.

**4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.** When practicing living organized around the Eightfold Path, it is important to cultivate what I call “self-state integration”, which involves discovering the levels of self-deception I enact that cause distress and confusion for myself and others.

**5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.** As the process of self-state integration matures, I understand more clearly how craving and clinging have created the unmanageability mentioned in step 1. Additionally, I am less self-conscious and more willing to humbly admit my shortcomings to myself and others, as seems appropriate.

**6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.** I regard my defects of character to be the continuing intrusion of thoughts, attitudes and behaviors, and, aware of the distress and confusion that occur due to craving and clinging, I am willing to “take refuge in the Dharma”.

**7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.** As a Buddhist, I don’t believe there’s a “Him” to take responsibility for my shortcomings; even if there is, my surrender to the Dharma as a way of living allows me to let go of them.

**8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.** Most of the people I harmed are no longer in my life, so making amends is not feasible. I believe that my ongoing commitment to a Dharmic lifestyle supports my social and interpersonal redemption. It is one of the reasons I took up psychotherapy and teaching meditation as a career. If anyone showed up who I have harmed, I believe it is more beneficial to them for me to be a different person with different attitudes and behaviors than is was when they knew me before.

**9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.** See step 8, above.

**10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.** See steps 8 and 9 above.

**11.** **Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.** This is where mindfulness and lovingkindness meditation are so important. I tell folks who practice the 12 steps that this is how to realize the intentions of the other steps, how to “let go and let God” (see step 3, above). Every time I notice that my mind is fostering the emergence of an unwholesome self-state conflict, I can let go back into the sensation of breathing to interrupt the development of that “defect of character”. Over time, and with enough regular meditation practice, I become more clearly aware of what self-state is emerging and be more disciplined in letting go of what is unwholesome and foster what is wholesome

**12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.** This represents to me the fulfillment of the Noble Eightfold Path! It can be considered an application of the Bodhisattva Vow, that is, to dedicate whatever achievements accomplished through my practice to the benefit of whomever I meet.

I hope these thoughts are beneficial in the process of Awakening.